

# Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1992

## Cuban Alternative

To the FE:

Cuban Greens/anti-authoritarians need our aid. Orlando Polo and Mercedes Paez of Cuba's anti-authoritarian/ecological/ anti-Militarist Green Path group have been touring the U.S. recently.

Arrested many times in Cuba, they are being repressed again as Cuban authorities are refusing to allow them re-admission to the country.

A campaign for them is being organized by Latin American Neither East Nor West (Cuban and other Latin Americans in Miami) and NYC Neither East Nor West. Green Path represents an alternative in Cuba that rejects both the capitalist and communist models and deserves our support.

You can help them by addressing protest letters to the "Cuban Interest Section" (Cuba's quasi-embassy in Washington DC) demanding Mercedes and Orlando be allowed to return home and not face repression once there. Send the support letters to NYC-Neither East nor West c/o Bob McGlynn, 528 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Brooklyn NY 11215. The letters will be sent in a group to the Cuban government officials.

Bob McGlynn  
Brooklyn NY

## I Don't Understand

Dear 5<sup>th</sup>:

I need you even if I don't always understand you. So, send me another year.

JF  
Los Angeles CA

## For a Change, Sabotage

Fifth Estate:

In a recent editorial, "How the U.S. Got Away With it," (FE, Summer 1991), you say "without a self-conscious re-definition of oneself as an opponent of this society and a vision of liberated future," the disaffected masses cited by author John Zerzan, et al, are easily re-organized back into the arms of the state.

While a lot of these part-time rebels are precisely too unconscious to count on for the anarchist game plan, you leave it a little vague as to just what that game plan is. An "independent terrain based on libertarian ideals" is imperative, if only we knew what the hell it is.

I know most of your paper admirably goes to spelling that out, and wars and anti-wars show us where we stand. The rest of the time things are not so unambiguous. Latter-day commies and Love & Rage types consider themselves opponents of society, too, but I want less to do with such demagogic militants than with the (often) sub-conscious subversives Zerzan writes of.

Apparently there is no center...all the non-participation in the world won't collapse the electoral system as long as polyticians can vote themselves in. On the other hand, the almost one-to-one ratio of police to protesters at some of these demos does not say much for outright confrontation. How about infiltrating them for a change, sabotage, undercover, in broad daylight even, the insurgents disguised as businessmen get away with mayhem.

Yes, the war sucked, revealing the depths of ugly American patriotism, but we knew that all along. Don't withdraw into your "embattled minority" yet, especially now as more people link the "victory" on the war front with the misery at home. Maybe the Big Break is coming, a power vacuum so complete it'll suck the Machine down with it. More likely is the gradual erosion we all feel in our bones. How to take advantage of that.

J. Jettison  
Minneapolis MN

## **It's Stupid**

Dear Fifth Estate:

I have recently learned about your publication and am very interested. I live in a small town by Springfield, Missouri. Nothing ever happens here; all people do is get stoned, trip acid, or get drunk. It's stupid!

Sometimes I wish I could just leave and go somewhere better, but I'm only 15, so I'm stuck. Not like there's anywhere to go anyway. But I'd like to get a year's subscription to the FE so I'll at least have something intelligent to read.

KC  
Missouri

*FE Note:* Living in a small town isolated from others with radical ideas, must be hard. It's easy to start thinking you're crazy when it's really them! Are you aware of folks in your state who publish *Anarchy*? You can get a copy of their paper by writing Columbia Anarchist League, POB 1446, Columbia MO 65205.

## **Strange Fascination**

Dear FE Folks:

Just received the Summer 1991 issue & it's great!

I've been using desktop publishing computers and programs for a bit now. They are not liberatory—but they do have a strange fascination. Kind of bewitching like TV.

But what do you have in the end? More time? Money savings? Excitement? No. Oh, well. Have you considered going back to the dark ages of linotype? Have fun whatever you do.

George Monk  
Yellow Springs OH

## **Emma G's Musical**

Dear Fifth Estate:

We thought our fellow readers of your publication would be interested to know: "E.G.: A Musical Portrait of Emma Goldman" at the National Opera Association at Northwestern University in Evanston IL.

This is a work with text by Karen Ruoff Dramer and myself, with music by me, that lies somewhere between opera and musical (it's also been called a "cabaret opera"), which has had successful performances at dozens of colleges, churches, synagogues and libraries, as well as at off-the-beaten-path places like the Alchemical Theater and the Libertarian Book Club in New York, a peace cafe in West Berlin, a former Communist recreation center in East Berlin, and an anarchist cafe ("La Mouette Rieuse") in Paris.

On Friday, December 27, at 8 p.m. we'll give E.G. her West Coast premiere at the Noe Valley Ministry, 1021 Sanchez St. in San Francisco. I'll be delivering a paper on Brecht, Blitzstein, Bernstein and Seigmeister at the International Brecht Society section of the Modern Language Association Convention in San Francisco on Sun., Dec. 29 at 7:15 pm. Anyone out there having a New Year's Eve party?

If you want information about future performances of E.G., please write me at the address below.

Leonard J. Lehrman  
10 Nob Hill Gate  
Roslyn NY 11576  
(516) 626-0238

## The Belly of the Beast

Greetings in the Struggle:

First, I'd like to say thanx for providing your very interesting anarchist publication free to those of us who are locked away behind the wall of this world's closed and secretive prison hierarchies.

Anti-authoritarian literature is very important to prisoners because the bureaucrats who hold the power want to manipulate a prisoner's mind with authoritarian disinformation. Prisoners must break their chains of reliance on the corporate media establishment and become empowered to change their current situation by receiving alternative literature. This is very hard to accomplish in a system where radical publications are routinely suppressed as coming from an "unauthorized source."

As a prisoner of this oppressive system, I realize that my only chance of survival once I'm released from the belly of the beast is to identify the social and cultural forces that have contributed to the cause of my oppression. Publications such as the *Fifth Estate* give me information the corporate media doesn't want me to know.

Revolution until victory.

In Solidarity,  
MK  
Clements Unit  
Amarillo TX

*FE Note:* Thanks for your appreciative note; your sentiments are exactly why we offer free subs to prisoners and GIs. State society is based on its armed force and its punitive power, so it is here that we must erode the power of authority.

You state an often cited official reason for denying prisoners access to literature.

It is more difficult for the screws to do so when it comes directly from the publisher.

One excellent source of anti-authoritarian information on struggles inside North American penal institutions is Prison News Service, c/o PSC Publishers, POB 5052, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1W4, Canada. It is free to prisoners.

## No Postage Necessary

Dear Friends:

This letter is to introduce you to a new form of communication. It is a sleeping giant of an underground subversive network. Oh, another dream of techno-utopia you say.

What is it, cellular phones for the masses? A TV on every subway car? No, it's not a machine. And, it doesn't cost you any money.

It's those goddamned envelopes. Those Business Reply Envelopes. The ones that say No Postage Necessary. They're everywhere. In junk mail, on the street, even on busses and trains. So, what you say? Well, consider these items:

- \* An envelope stuffed with something interesting provides some mail worker with a ten-minute break from work.
- \* It is a direct form of communication. Your letter or artwork or whatever is a personal letter in a work place filled with mind-numbing forms.
- \* It can't be censored. Since your letter arrives in the same envelope that all the other mail arrives in, it can't be weeded out. The boss's ability to control what is allowed in the workplace is eroded.
- \* The company pays for it. Every letter they receive in these envelopes costs them 39 cents postage due.
- \* No one owns this form of communication. There is no leader. There are no guidelines.
- \* The entire network can never be fully known. The mail arrives randomly. It can't be anthologized. It's not for sale. You can't buy it.
- \* The only way they can stop us is if they stop sending out all these envelopes. And that'd be great.
- \* This form of communication has a built-in ending. When the government and corporations crumble, so will the mail room and these envelopes.
- \* It doesn't even have a name. You can name it, but it will be different in different cities.
- \* No meetings.

I worked in a mail room. In those horrible wretched days, I always wished that an envelope I opened would have something different inside. Something interesting. Well, it never happened for me, but now you and I can make that dream come true for the thousands of poor schleps across the country who work in the mail room of some big corporation.

In Leisure,  
U.A. Sanabria  
Chicago IL

## Who Doesn't Exist

Dear Folks:

I was excited by your review of *Bisexuality: A Reader and Sourcebook*. (See Spring 1991 FE.) I am bisexual and as one of the people who doesn't exist, it is nice to know that you believe in me. Thanks.

Carol  
E. Lansing

*FE Note:* The book mentioned above is available from FE Books for \$11 plus postage or, the issue in which the review appeared for \$1.50.

## Investigate this Gulag

Dear Friends:

We have been having a lot of problems receiving literature that's pro-prisoner and anti-state. Perhaps the Post Office should investigate this gulag. I don't know exactly what's going on, but I do know the local postmaster is related to a high-ranking prison officer.

As you might know, I've been active in trying to organize the wrongly incarcerated. To that end, a couple of years ago, I helped form The Union of Incarcerated But Innocent Citizens, or simply The Union. Last year we even managed to put out a couple of small newsletters.

Things have gotten real bad here. Intellectual repression is on the rise and the food situation is getting bad. Petty harassment is increasing too. I believe the officials are trying to cause a riot to justify to the taxpayers the need to build and staff more maximum security gulags in this state.

Religious and racial discrimination is definitely on the rise as is official corruption.

Rabbi Jacob Feuerwerker

P.O. Box 56

Lebanon OH 45036

## Need Support Now

To The Fifth Estate:

El Grupo Impulso Autogestionario (Group for the Encouragement of Self-Management), la Biblioteca "Alberto Ghirardo" Library and the Centro De Estudios Sociales "Rafael Barrett" social studies center, together with the Union Socialista Libertaria and the Taller Ecologista (Ecology Workshop), have all had to move again. In the last five years we have had to move three times, and this has made our functioning much more difficult.

We have had to move so often because of economic difficulties and now the same kind of problems are threatening the continuation of our endeavors. In order to deal with present needs and to work toward acquiring our own building, we are appealing for solidarity and support from our comrades abroad, especially in the so-called "developed" countries.

The current depressed economic situation in Argentina is making it impossible to continue with our activities and projects without outside economic help. Checks or money orders should be made out to either Carlos Solero or Pedro Munich and sent to: C.C. 984,2000 Rosario, Argentina. We will tell those who send donations how the money is used, about our activities and the outcome of our projects. From Rosario, we send you our fraternal libertarian greetings.

Translated and distributed by Charlatan Stew, P.O. Box 31461, Seattle WA 98103 USA

## Zerzan: Round 17

To the Fifth Estate:

I was somewhat surprised that my criticisms which appeared last issue of George Bradford's "Civilization in Bulk" (Spring 1991 FE) elicited such a harsh attack from him. While I'm not sure how enlightening it will be to extend this exchange, there are a couple of points I'd like to make regarding my thesis that symbolization and division of labor set in motion the series of horrors that is civilization's trajectory.

Bradford is obviously free to see these elements in a more benign, orthodox light. He is also free to claim that I ignore all criticisms. Factually speaking, however, I have responded, as I think those at all familiar with the topic of origins and development of our now near-terminal estrangement from nature will recall.

What he really objects to, apparently, is that I haven't yet seen sufficient reason to renounce my hypothesis: the many replies I have made have not been to his liking. On other occasions I have, privately and publicly, asked of

Bradford, “If original symbolization and division of labor are not alienating and malignant, at what point do they become injurious to whole, free life? That is, where do you draw the line?” He has not responded.

He claims that I have always stated my findings with a dogmatic, absolutist contempt for other viewpoints. What I have tried to do is present an interpretation in the strongest way I can. I recognize my series of essays as the unfolding of a hypothesis, nothing more, and apologize if I have come off so absurdly as to sound like Revealed Truth.

In closing, I recommend Ian Hodder’s *Domestication of Europe*, especially to Bradford, and express my regrets that after the FE published so much on this subject for most of a decade, pro and con, one of the paper’s principal figures has decided it was all a case of “theoretical buffoonery.”

John Zerzan

Eugene OR

*George Bradford responds:* John Zerzan’s letter actually confirms my statement that rather than reply directly to specific criticisms of his anti-symbolization thesis, he merely repeats his assertions and dismisses his critics as conservative, etc. As it has been for years, so it goes in his latest communique; rather than comment on even one of what was a reduced number of arguments in our last exchange, he simply declares symbolic activity “alienating and malignant,” and insists I state when this malignancy occurred.

Zerzan once more misses the point: he has never demonstrated his idea that symbolic activity was (or is) evil or alienated except by taking for granted the meaning of words and human activities as defined by the megamachine, which is why his theory has been aptly described as a mechanistic reversal of the ideology of progress.

(Mixing in the division of labor—which he and I will certainly define differently, and which is by his own schema secondary to symbolism—shows a general and persistent sloppiness in his thinking on these matters that makes responding in detail a futile exercise with dramatically diminishing returns.)

While it’s touching to see Zerzan apologize for being misunderstood as staking a claim to ultimate truth, it couldn’t be taken very seriously by anyone familiar with his work. That, in fact, is his distinguishing feature. By claiming that language and culture are themselves the alienation that we suffer, he has judged all and every culture that has ever existed as alienated (except for a time about which he can only speculate, when human beings allegedly lived without any symbolic activity). This means that any approach that defends cultures of any kind, such as primal, tribal or vernacular cultures that have existed throughout history—cultures about which we have some actual knowledge—is a defense of alienation, domination, and even “our near-terminal estrangement from nature.”

Thus Zerzan is not simply presenting one possible interpretation of events that occurred tens of thousands of years ago, he has created a rigid, linear scenario of history based on tenuous and often contradictory speculations, along with occasional insights into or references to fundamental problems of existence. His “general line” of anti-symbolization then gets used to make authoritative statements about actual conditions and people’s practical activities today—for example, his assumption that if language’s emergence is tied up with the origins of domination, then regardless of different social, cultural (even physiological) conditions today, no freedom could be achieved with the abolition of language. To defend language now that it has been with us for so many tens (hundreds?) of thousands of years then becomes the equivalent of defending some kind of psychic fascism.

“Only a politics that undoes language and time,” he has written, “has any meaning.” Thus any politics that might fall short is not one possible response, but the problem itself. Agriculture being by his definition nothing but alienation, any idea of transforming food cultivation is only a conservative, half-measure, and any concern about actually feeding ourselves is met with a shrug. (Even Ian Nodding,

cited by Zerzan as backing his thesis, writes in *The Domestication of Europe* that the evidence, “limited as it is, seems almost to rejoice in its own ambiguity.” Zerzan could learn a lot from this circumspect approach. Hodding’s book is suggestive and complex, fascinating as much for its errors as its insights, I think. But it did not convince me.)

For those who might argue I am criticizing Zerzan for humbly defending a point of view and nothing more, let me give another recent example. In the Spring 1991 issue of *Anarchy*, he criticizes the “partial” critique of civilization in the *Fifth Estate* for its defense of community, which “as a liberatory notion is a fiction” in his view because the term has been colonized by power. Thus, to speak of authentic community is “to affirm civilization,” a kind of “middle-class, respect-the-system protest.”

The defense of community, he asserts, is a “conservative gesture that faces away from the radical break required.” He never elucidates what would constitute such a break, except the establishment of—get this—a “negative ‘community.’” For one so distrustful of symbolism and language, Zerzan takes the surface appearances of words for granted with a vengeance.

The most recent exchange between Zerzan and myself is only another example, finally and despite his disclaimer to the contrary, of his absolutist arrogance, his claim to superiority over all “partial” critiques. Because my essay did not accept his anti-culture thesis, remaining somewhat agnostic about what could only be murky origins, he attacks it as “only somewhat critical of civilization” and, in fact, no more than “quotes and hyperbole.” He must really be obtuse, then, to express surprise at the sharpness of my reply. I see no reason to mince words with someone who has carved a position, almost a career, out of studied intolerance of views differing even slightly from his own.

On one thing Zerzan and I agree: continuing this exchange is pretty pointless. The issues are involved, complicated, and stretching back over a decade. Readers need not take his or my word for it, and can sort it out for themselves by reading the articles listed in our last exchange (in the letters section of the Summer 1991 issue) and his book.

FE Note: John Zerzan’s book *Elements of Refusal* is available through FE Books for \$9 plus postage. See our Book Page.

## Free Emma Now

Dear FE:

Wanted—anarchist wishes to set up a newsletter to bring together Emma Goldman supporters who are interested in liberating EG archives currently held by author Candice Falk of Berkeley CA

Bill Rowe

328 Fulton

Kingsford MI 49802

## EX-FE STAFFER WOULD LIKE MAIL

Former *Fifth Estate* writer, Nick Medvecky, was sentenced earlier this year on a frame-up job to 25 years in prison for violating federal cocaine conspiracy laws. Nick is a victim of the Reagan/Bush Drug War hysteria and is appealing the harsh sentence.

He welcomes mail and will respond to all. Write: Nick Medvecky, No. 12155639, Ray Brook NY 12977

## Can't Support COs

Dear FE:

Your latest "issue," that of overweening and just faintly obsequious support for U.S. military "conscientious objectors" to actually fighting in "Gulf War '91," leaves me a bit puzzled. (See Summer 1991 FE, "Military Continues Assault on GI Resisters.")

I am unable to support, despite their former position in our socio-economic hierarchy, anybody who voluntarily joins a branch of any government's armed forces. I am especially opposed to supporting any soldier who becomes a conscientious objector because of a religious conversion—in this case, the religion of submission, Islam.

"Poverty draft" or not, a person who joins the military does so with the full and complete knowledge that he/she will be wearing a uniform, undergo rigorous and insidious mental and physical training, be required to obey the orders of "superiors," whatever they may be, and generally suplicate one's individual character and intelligence to that of a mass human machine.

The idea of uniformed service is clear in our society; to assume that one who "joins up" does not understand the nature of military command (and its purpose) is the sort of pitiful knee-jerk reaction I normally expect from the lame leftoid liberal contingent of reformists.

A blind support for those who were willing to gain the "advantages" of a military training but balk at actually being required to fight—for whomever's benefit—is a repudiation of your critique of mass society's gullibility and an individual's escape from it. Your graphics frequently mock, in an oh-so-knowing and chicly post-modern way, those of whom you obviously hold responsible for our spectacular eco-destructo-genocidal society/way of life.

Why should we excuse those who make a direct decision to personally equip heads of state with the tools of active power (i.e., armies) any more than we should excuse those whose jobs perpetuate a demented vision?

Based on your historical fondness for the '60s era anti-war struggles (when baby boomers, new electronic youth culture, and a military draft conspired to temporarily alter the nature of mass political opposition to the war) and the omnipresent FE "street fighting (wo)man" sub-text, I am not surprised at your overt support for our (i.e., C.O.) troops. I also note that the article concerning Desert Storm C.O.s was not written by one of your usual staff members.

R.L. Smith  
c/o Double the Fees Club  
P.O. Box 640186  
San Francisco CA 94164

*Mitchel Cohen responds:* Forgive me, R.L. Smith, for I have sinned! It's been 2,500 conscientious objectors since my last confession. I criticize myself (bonk! bonk!) for the grave violation of your commandment: "Thou shalt be born a ready-made revolutionary, and fuck you if you don't see as revolutionarily as I do when I decide you should."

All my political life I've seen these little Stalins in anarchist drag waving the bibles of their new order, whether it be Mao's *Little Red Book* or *The Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* by Alexander Berkman, condemning everyone else's struggle to resist oppression for not following their True Path.

Indeed, what a twist of history—what a lack of revolutionary morality!—it takes to block support for the thousands of resisters in the military—many of whom face years in prison for refusing to fight for imperialism!—by feebly claiming that doing so offers "overt support for our [i.e., Amerika's] troops." Here are people who are, on their own (with no help from Smith), fighting against everything the system's inculcated into them since birth at great personal risk, and there's RL Smith frothing: Nope, it's too late. You shouldn't've been a uniformed soldier to begin with, you stupid pig, you shouldn't've been a worker in a factory, you shouldn't've been a waitress in uniform obeying the orders of your 'superiors' and suplicating your individual character and intelligence to that of a mass [in]human machine.



R.L., you sound like my neighbors in Bensonhurst! They say: 'We Jews were able to make it after being oppressed, what's so special about the niggers?' Do you really believe that because you (supposedly) were able to see through everything, we all should or could be such Nietzschean ubermenschen completely unaffected by everything around us from birth, able to leap contradictions in a single bound?! Have revolutionaries no responsibility for creating the kind of long-term communities of resistance and nurturance that would make it possible for individuals to resist, instead of simply lambasting them for being too late when they finally are able to? "You, individual, should should should should should should should should should should should should. You've been bad. I excommunicate you!"

Oh, what a headache-we lowly workers and revolutionaries must be for stalinoidanarchists like RL Smith! Said Bakhunin to RL Smith upon Mt. Sinai (we've got it all on video!): "Here, Moses, take these two tablets and call me in the morning."

Mitchel Cohen

Red Balloon Collective

2652 Cropsey Ave., #7H

Brooklyn, NY 11214

*R. Rifles Responds:* R.L.'s blanket rejection of any acts of conscience in an all-volunteer army is ridiculous. Most military recruits are young, 18 to 25 years old, and may not yet have formed strong political opinions. Often the act of participating in America's murderous domination of the rest of the planet, or the direct tyranny of the military experience itself, can dramatically change a person's previously held views.

I joined the Marines in 1979 at the tender age of 17 to escape the smothering boredom of school and the looming prison of work. At the time I didn't know what a society of the spectacle was, but signing a paper that would take me away from one world of hierarchy and petty tyrants to a different one that sounded meaningful was easy.

As an eye-opening and radicalizing experience, it was indeed meaningful, only not the way I anticipated. I left the Marines completely disillusioned with the USA; combined with later exposure to different political ideas, my military experience drastically altered the way I perceived the world. But I did join, and by R.L.'s logic a person's changing beliefs are forever invalidated by this act.

## **In the Marine Corps**

Folks:

I recently received your publication in a package of zines that Hippycore sent me. Needless to say, I am very impressed.

Right now I am incarcerated in the Marine Corps. Actually, I have no one to blame; I was the one who signed the papers. The past few years have been the most horrible of my life!

All I see around me is blind hatred, bigotry, sexism and aggression. I don't subscribe to everything your publication stands for, but I agree with most of it. Please include me on your G.I. subscription list.

JP

Yuma AZ



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